

OLD TESTAMENT SERIES No. 3

THE HOUSE OF JACOB

(Genesis 25, 11-50, 25)

By

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet will study the history of the Old Testament from the death of Abraham until the death of his great- grandson, Joseph; in other words, the history of Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of the latter who founded the twelve tribes of Israel.

For twenty years Isaac and Rebecca were without children, until at the prayer of Isaac, God granted them twin sons. The first of these twin children is described as, “hairy like a skin.” (25, 25) This phrase denotes a phenomenon known in science as hypertrichosis or an excessive growth of hair. This condition occasioned his name, Esau, which in Hebrew means veiled or covered. Owing to the peculiar and prophetic circumstances of their birth, the second son was called Jacob, a word which in Hebrew means ‘one who holds the heel,’ hence a supplanter and in the event the younger did supplant the elder and secure the right of primogeniture, which normally should have gone to Esau, the first born.

ESAU AND JACOB

When these twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca grew up, they showed marked differences in character. Esau took to hunting for a livelihood and lived in the open; Jacob was of a quiet, home-loving disposition. Also they divided the affection of their parents, and this had far-reaching results: Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his hunting; and Rebecca loved Jacob.” (25, 28) This is good psychology. “Predilections often arise from contrasts. The gentle Isaac loved Esau. The energetic Rebecca loved Jacob.”

THE MESS OF POTTAGE

One day Esau returned ravenously hungry after a long period out of doors to find Jacob with a “pottage (or gruel) of lentils” (25, 34) cooked and ready to be eaten. Esau asked his brother for some of “this red pottage” (25, 30) to ease his hunger. Jacob’s guile showed itself at once and he justified his name—‘supplanter.’ He offered Esau the food if

the latter would cede his first birthright in return. Esau, weak with hunger, reckoned little of the privilege of the first born for the moment and offered to barter it for the meal of lentils. Cleverly, Jacob required that he make this bargain under oath; thus, it would be irrevocable. Again, Esau readily complied and so, “for one mess (i.e., meal) sold his first birthright” (Hebrews 12, 16) little concerned at the time about the folly of his transaction.

ISAAC

Famines were always of frequent occurrence in Palestine because of the uncertain rainfall. On the occasion of one such famine, Isaac went to Gerara, the Capital of the Philistines. Here God appeared to Him; forbade him to go into Egypt; and renewed to him the promises that He had made to Abraham.

Isaac had the special protection of God. His flocks and herds increased; his crops were very abundant; he became a wealthy man. This aroused the envy of his Philistine neighbors, and they stopped up all the wells which he used for watering his flocks—wells indeed which his father, Abraham, had sunk. This envy was found even in the Philistine king. He came to Isaac and curtly ordered him to depart, making no secret of his motive for so ordering. Isaac removed to “the torrent of Gerara” (26, 17), but with the same result as before. Then, following the valley of this stream, he finally put himself out of range of the Philistines’ molestation. Later he moved thence to Bersabee where he was favored with a second revelation and a renewal of the divine promise of special protection. Here he built an altar, pitched his tent, and made a permanent abode.

After this, “the king of the Philistines” with his chief adviser and the leader of his soldiers came to Isaac. For all his former opposition, Abimelech had come to recognize that Isaac was specially favored by God. As such, he was not a man to be antagonized, so the Philistines made a formal alliance with him.

From this point Isaac fills only a small role in this history. He is altogether an insignificant figure in comparison with Abraham, his father and his masterly and astute wife, Rebecca, seems to have completely controlled the fortunes of the family. He never traveled beyond the boundaries of Palestine, and he plays a pathetic part in Sacred History, exciting sympathy rather than admiration.

The remainder of the Book of Genesis may be divided into the history of Jacob and his twelve sons—the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel (chapters 27-35); the history of Joseph, son of Jacob, in particular (chapters 37-45); the migration to Egypt of Jacob and his family—a real turning point in the history of the Hebrew people. (chapters 46-50).

JACOB—THE SUPPLANTER

Esau and Jacob grew to manhood in time; and the former, at the age of forty, married two wives—Hittite women and heathens, who “offended the mind of Isaac and Rebecca.” (26, 35).

These evil marriages and his former rashness in ceding his first birthright to Jacob showed plainly that Esau was unworthy to inherit the promises made to Abraham. Yet for all that, he retained the affection of his father. Rebecca, however, had her own plans.

In the meantime, with the advance of years, Isaac’s sight failed, and he began to think of death. Therefore, when he was now a hundred and thirty seven years old he decided to bestow on Esau the patriarchal blessing by means of which the Messianic inheritance was transmitted. With this in view he ordered Esau to take his weapons of the chase and to procure and prepare a meal of “savory meat.” (27, 4).

Rebecca overheard him; and she promptly sent Jacob to kill two young goats that she would make into a meal for Isaac, Jacob presenting himself for the patriarchal blessing. Jacob protested that his father, though blind, would yet know him from his brother because of the smoothness of his skin. However, the artful Rebecca provided against this by covering Jacob’s hands and neck with the skins of the kids. Then, dressing him in Esau’s garments, she sent him with the meat to obtain Isaac’s blessing.

HEIR BY GUILF

Jacob entered, bringing the cooked meat. When Isaac asked who he was, Jacob replied, “I am Esau thy firstborn.” (27, 19). Isaac expressed surprise that he could have procured the meat so quickly, but Jacob parried this by saying, “It was the will of God that what I sought came quickly in my way” (27, 20). Still suspicious of his identity, Isaac summoned him closer and felt his neck and hands. However, the goatskins confused him and he said, “The voice indeed is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau” (27, 22). Again, he enquired if he was Esau and again Jacob affirmed that he was Esau. Then Isaac ate the meat and drank the wine that Jacob had brought and he blessed Jacob praying God to prosper him and prophesying that peoples and tribes and “his mother’s children” (27, 29) would be ruled by him.

Jacob had only just left his father when Esau entered prepared to receive the blessing. Isaac now realized that he had been deceived; but it was too late to revoke what was done. Esau, angry and grieved, insisted that he also should receive a blessing. Isaac blessed him but it was a different blessing from Jacob’s. “Far from the fertility of the earth and the dew of heaven will thy blessing be . . .” (27, 39-40); i.e., Esau would live outside the Promised Land of Chanaan in a bleak country; he would live by the sword; he

would be subject to Jacob, but in time would free himself from his brother's power. This prophecy was fulfilled in Esau and his descendants who lived in the barren country of Edom, were later subjects of King David—a descendant of Jacob (2 Kings 8, 14), and eventually shook off the dominion of Israel. When the Messiah actually came, Herod the Great was King of Palestine (40-4 B.C.). Thus, the scepter had passed from Juda; Esau ruled Jacob.

A LIE OR A MYSTERY?

Here a word must be said on the age-old question: Did Jacob tell a lie? Much ink has been used on it; and it would be well if a glance through the history of this question were taken by those who wrongly think that the discipline of the Catholic Church unreasonably restrains intellectual freedom or cramps one's style. Origen and Saint John Chrysostom admitted that Jacob lied, but sought to justify him in doing so. Saint Augustine went into the question at great length, and he gave as his solution that Jacob's deceit was "not a lie but a mystery;" the goatskins signified sin and Jacob wearing them was a sign or figure of Christ Who carried not His own, but others' sins.

This explanation was accepted for centuries; even Saint Bonaventure and Saint Thomas Aquinas accepted it. Dun Scotus and Nicholas of Lyra called it in doubt; but it was only in the seventeenth century that it met with determined opposition. In the eighteenth century, Saint Augustine's theory was almost entirely abandoned. Modern commentators on Genesis almost unanimously assert that Jacob lied.

A lie is speaking contrary to what one thinks whether by words or by signs. In a lie, there are three things: the will to speak falsehood, speaking contrary to the judgment in the mind, deceit of one's neighbor. These three elements are found in Jacob's action above.

Whether Jacob sinned is a different question. In itself, objectively a lie is always and essentially sinful—venially sinful, if it is simply a violation of the truth; gravely sinful, if it involves a violation of justice or of charity in a grave matter. Some would excuse Jacob entirely from formal sin on the ground of ignorance; but this is not feasible. A good case, however, can be made for excusing him from grave (or mortal) sin on the ground that he did not violate justice or charity: Esau had already freely sold his first birthright for the meal of pottage; hence it was only an officious lie, sinful but not mortally sinful.

That deceit and lying are foolish policy as well as being sinful is shown from the subsequent career of Jacob. Esau was so enraged at the events above narrated that he planned to murder Jacob. Rebecca again came to the rescue, and sent Jacob into Haran to her brother, Laban. She won Isaac's consent to his going by pleading the desirability of Jacob's taking a wife from among their own people after their sad experience of Esau's

wives. She intended that he should not remain long from home; but in the event Jacob's exile lasted over twenty years (27, 41—28, 10).

About fifteen miles north of Jerusalem on his way from Bersabee to Haran, Jacob had a consoling vision. In his sleep, he saw a ladder that reached from heaven to earth. Angels ascended and descended by this ladder; and the Lord leaning on it spoke to Jacob and renewed the Messianic promises and the promise of His special Divine protection. This ladder was a symbol of the good Providence of God exercised by the ministry of His angels, who bring to heaven the prayers of mankind and to earth God's graces.

When Jacob awoke in the morning, his mind full of the vision, he took the stone that he had used as a pillow and set it in position as a "title" (28, 18) or monument to commemorate the vision. He consecrated it with oil and he called that place Bethel—"the house of God." (28, 22).

Arrived in Mesopotamia, Jacob met a group of shepherds at a well, and as he was speaking to these, Rachel, the daughter of Laban and first cousin of Jacob, came with her father's flocks to the same well. Jacob discovered who she was from the shepherds, went with her to Laban's house and remained there for a month helping with the care of the flocks. Laban saw that he was a useful man for the work of shepherd, and he introduced the subject of wages for Jacob. Jacob was in love with Rachel, and he promised to work for seven years with Laban if the latter would give him Rachel in marriage. In the East in those times wives were got by giving a sum of money to their parents (the usage is still in vogue in places), and Jacob was yet a poor man, "With my staff I passed over this Jordan." (32, 10). Laban agreed to this bargain; but when the seven years were ended and the marriage ceremony arranged, in lieu of the beautiful Rachel on whom Jacob had set his heart, Laban substituted her elder sister, Lia, who was bleary-eyed, and less favored with good looks. Jacob was deceived; the supplanter supplanted. Such deceit is possible in eastern countries where the women wear thick veils that cover the whole face. Only on the day after the marriage did Jacob realize that he had been cheated. When he reproached Laban for the deception, the latter pleaded in excuse that it was not the custom of that country to give a younger sister in marriage before an elder, and he proposed that Jacob should marry Rachel also and work with him for a further seven years in return. To this Jacob agreed, and when the festivities of the first marriage were ended, i.e., after a week, Jacob took Rachel as a second wife.

This raises a fresh problem now, namely: Was Jacob's marriage with Lia a valid marriage at all? No, because an error about the identity of the person with whom marriage is contracted renders the marriage null, since in the contract of matrimony, unlike other contracts, the person is the substantial object of the contract. Moreover, such an error makes the marriage null by the law of nature. From the text of Genesis it seems that Jacob either was ignorant of this principle or else (and more probably) that he knew it

but did not avail himself of it because of the inconveniences that would arise from repudiating Lia. So in accepting Laban's proposal he consented to take Lia to wife also, and thus the marriage became valid from that moment.

THE TWELVE SONS OF JACOB

Lia had four children, sons, whom she named Ruben, Simeon, Levi and Juda. During all this time Rachel was childless; and envy of her sister's family drove her to resort to a strange expedient, an expedient, however, which was evidently a social institution of those far off times. Rachel gave her female slave, named Bala, to Jacob as a wife of secondary degree, and then adopted as her own the children of Bala—two sons, named Dan and Nephtali.

Lia now followed her sister's example, and gave her slave, Zelpha, to Jacob in the same way; and from this union there were two sons, Gad and Aser.

Later Lia had two other sons herself—Issachar and Zabulon; and a daughter named Dina. Then Rachel, to her great joy, had a son whom she named Joseph.

At this point Jacob demanded from Laban that he be allowed to return to Chanaan with his family. He had long since completed the seven years for Rachel and for his wages in the interval it was agreed that he should have all the sheep and goats that were either black or speckled. Jacob did not depart at once. At Laban's request, he remained in his service. However, the arrangement about the division of the flocks came into force there and then, and Jacob now had his own flocks. This time Laban was outwitted. Jacob had the Divine protection to prosper him, and it soon came about that his flocks excited first the surprise, and then the envy of Laban and Laban's sons. Jacob soon sensed the hostility of Laban. Moreover, he was ordered in a vision to leave Mesopotamia. Therefore, he consulted with Lia and Rachel, who readily consented to go. During Laban's absence from home at the sheep-shearing season, therefore, Jacob collected his family, goods, and flocks, and he had gone three days' journey before Laban knew of his departure at all. Laban set out in pursuit and overtook him in Galaad; but he was warned by a vision not to injure Jacob, and the hostilities went no further than mutual reproaches—for Jacob's discourteous departure on the one side, and for Laban's dishonesty on the other.

Next Jacob sent messengers to Esau who was now a prosperous sheik in Edom, south of the Dead Sea. The messengers brought back news that Esau was coming with four hundred followers to meet Jacob. Alarmed lest his brother might mean vengeance, Jacob implored God's protection in a very beautiful and humble prayer (32, 9-12). Then he chose out rich presents for Esau.

That night Jacob had a vision: an angel wrestled with him until morning, and Jacob was able to resist him. This signified that if he could prevail against God, much more would he prevail against Esau. In memory of this vision, God changed Jacob's name to Israel ('God has wrestled'). (32, 38).

In the event, Esau was friendly. He accepted the gifts and returned home, leaving Jacob to continue his journey in peace. The latter crossed the Jordan, and came to Salem where he bought a portion of land from the local Hevite owners for a hundred coins. His stay here was short, however. The son of the local sheik raped Dina, and her brothers avenged the crime by the cruel and craftily planned killing of all the men of the tribe. This made it impossible for Jacob to remain. Besides, the Divine command bade him to move southward. He went on to Bethel, where he had another vision; thence southward again till he came to Hebron.

RACHEL'S DEATH

On this last stage of the journey, Rachel died in childbirth at Ephrata (later Bethlehem). The sacred writer notes that it was "in the springtime" (35, 16), which shows how keenly the tragedy of his beloved wife's death was felt by Jacob, since every little circumstance was remembered and handed down. The dying mother named her child Benoni ('the son of my pain'); but Jacob changed the name to Benjamin ('the son of the right hand,' i.e., of good omen), probably because the other would be a continual reminder of Rachel's death.

She was buried about half a mile north of Bethlehem, and her tomb is still there.

Jacob proceeded to Hebron and rejoined his parents. He and Esau met again when their father, Isaac, died at the age of a hundred and eighty years.

We now come to the history of Jacob's twelve sons who founded "the twelve tribes of Israel." Of outstanding interest among them is Joseph, son of Rachel, although in the inscrutable designs of God's Providence not he, but Juda inherited the Messianic promises.

Joseph was a favorite with his father both because he was the child of his old age and the child of Rachel, and also because of his keen intelligence, sweet disposition and great virtue. Not so, however, with Joseph's brothers who were ill disposed towards him.

When Joseph, at the age of sixteen, was with Dan, Nephtali, Gad, Aser (the sons of Bala and Zelpha) shepherding their father's flocks he saw them commit "a most wicked crime" (37, 2) (what it was we are not told), and he reported the fact to Jacob. This roused their anger. To their anger was added envy when they saw that their father favored him, and

dressed him in “a coat of diverse colors” (37, 3). Again, Joseph had two dreams with a prophetic message in them. In the first, he and his brothers were making sheaves of corn in the harvest field, and his brothers’ sheaves bowed down and worshipped his sheaves. In the second, he saw the sun, the moon, and eleven stars worship him. Joseph told these dreams to his father and his brothers, and they were quick to interpret the meaning. In the second, especially they saw symbolized by the sun, moon and eleven stars Joseph’s father, mother and eleven brothers. His brothers were now fiercely jealous of Joseph.

Some time after these incidents, Jacob sent Joseph to visit his brothers who were tending their flocks at a distance. He found them in Dothain—four days’ journey northward from Hebron. When they saw him coming some of their number plotted to kill him. Ruben was not a party to this plot, and when he heard of it, he suggested that instead of taking the boy’s life violently they should put him in a disused well, which was near, there to die of hunger and exposure. He intended to rescue Joseph later unseen by the others.

Ruben’s suggestion was adopted. They stripped Joseph of his colored coat, and thrust him into the well. But soon after, Ruben being absent, a caravan of Egyptian traders passed by, and Juda (to spare Joseph’s life) proposed that they should sell him as a slave to these merchants. Therefore, they took him from the well and traded him “for twenty pieces of silver.” (37, 28). When Ruben returned to the well, to his dismay there was no trace of Joseph.

Next arose the question of explaining to their father what had happened, and they solved it in a cruel and deceitful fashion. They killed a kid of the flock, dipped Joseph’s coat in the blood, and sent the bloodstained garment to Jacob. At once Jacob concluded that a wild beast had killed and devoured his beloved Joseph, and he was inconsolable at the loss of his son. Meantime Joseph was taken to Egypt by the merchants, and sold by them to a certain Putiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh.

Here the narrative is interrupted to give something of the history of Juda. He married a Chanaanite woman, and their first son, Her, was so wicked that God slew him. Her left no male issue, and following a social custom of the time Onan, his brother, married Tamar, the widow of Her. He also was a bad man and, like his brother, he was slain by God for the crime still called after him (38, 10). We are then told of the peculiar circumstances under which was born Phares, the twin son of Juda and Tamar. This Tamar is one of the four women mentioned—three are cited by name—in the genealogy of Our Divine Lord in Saint Matthew 1, 3.

JOSEPH IN EGYPT

Joseph was a virtuous man and he had God’s protection. In slavery he rose steadily in the

esteem of his master, until before long Putiphar entrusted his house and property to His care: and the Lord blessed the house of the Egyptian for Joseph's sake, and multiplied all his substance (i.e., property), both at home and in the fields." (39, 5). There were troubles in store for him, however.

Morals in ancient Egypt were of a low standard, as is well known from extra-biblical sources. Joseph had inherited no small share of his mother's good looks; and the wife of Putiphar fell in love with him, and tried to lure him into committing adultery. He steadfastly refused time after time. Then when she saw herself powerless to seduce him her fascination turned into raging enmity, and she accused him unjustly to her husband. Joseph was promptly removed from his high position and committed to prison. Here again, his sterling good qualities won for him the favor of the gaoler and he was placed in charge of the prisoners (39, 23).

We now obtain a glimpse of the arbitrary rule of the kings of ancient Egypt. The chief baker and the chief cupbearer (or butler) of the royal palace offended Pharaoh, and they were put in the prison where Joseph was in charge. One morning he found them more than usually depressed. Each of them had had a dream the previous night. They could not interpret the meaning of these dreams, and consequently they were annoyed. Joseph, enlightened by God, told them the prophetic meaning of the dreams—for prophetic they were indeed.

The cupbearer had dreamt that he saw a vine with three branches that sprouted and produced grapes. He took the grapes, pressed the juice from them into Pharaoh's special drinking-cup, and gave it to the king to drink. Joseph told him that in three days he would be restored to his former position. The baker dreamed that he was carrying on his head (in Egyptian fashion) three baskets. In the topmost of these were various kinds of cooked food, and the birds of the air were eating out of it. Joseph told him that in three days Pharaoh would condemn him to be hanged, and the birds of prey would eat his corpse.

After three days came the king's birthday, and a great feast was held. Such feasts were always a time for revising judgments; and on this occasion, as Joseph had predicted, the baker was condemned to be hanged, while the butler was pardoned and restored.

JOSEPH—"THE STAY OF THE PEOPLE"

Joseph had asked the cupbearer to remember him and plead for his release; but the cupbearer forgot. Two years afterwards an incident occurred which recalled Joseph to his memory. Pharaoh himself was disturbed by dreams. In one, he saw seven fat cattle feeding on the banks of the Nile, and seven lean cattle came up from the river and devoured them. In another, he saw a stalk of corn having seven full, ripe ears; and then came seven thin,

wasted ears that destroyed the good ones. The official interpreters of the court could make nothing of these dreams. Then the cup-bearer told Pharaoh of Joseph and of his interpretation of the dreams two years earlier.

Joseph was brought to the king, and at once, he gave the meaning of these dreams of Pharaoh, which again were prophetic: there would be in Egypt seven years of great abundance, followed by seven years of severe famine. Further, Joseph advised Pharaoh to take means of dealing with the coming crisis by storing up the extra corn of the abundant years, so that it would be available for “the seven years of scarcity.” (41, 54).

Pharaoh was much pleased with Joseph. He saw that the young Hebrew had great wisdom, and he appointed Joseph his chief executive officer in the kingdom, gave him the royal signet ring, a robe of silk and a gold chain—signs of his rank; and he commanded all the people to honor him as governor of the country. The king also gave to Joseph an Egyptian name: Safnat Paaneah (41, 45). The translation of this name is most probably, ‘God saith, he is living.’ Contrary to the general usage as found in Egyptian inscriptions with similar names no particular divinity such as Isis or Amon or Ra is named in this title of Joseph, but simply God. This is through “the extreme courtesy of Pharaoh. Good Hebrew that he was, Joseph did not adore the Egyptian gods, and his new name was a mark of respect for his monotheistic religion.”

Joseph also married Aseneth, daughter of another Putiphar—the pagan priest of Heliopolis (the city of Ra, the sun-god); and of this marriage there were two sons, Manasses and Ephraim, of whom later on we hear a great deal.

At once Joseph made preparations for storing the corn of the seven fruitful years, during which “there was so great abundance of wheat that it was equal to the sand of the sea.” (41,49). Then came the lean years, and with a vengeance. Soon the plenty of the fruitful years was consumed, and, famine prevailed everywhere. The people came to the king clamoring for food, and Pharaoh told them simply, “Go to Joseph”. (41, 55). Joseph sold the wheat that he had stored to the Egyptians; and outsiders quickly began to flock to Egypt “to buy food, and to seek some relief of their want.” (41, 57).

JOSEPH—“PRINCE OF HIS BRETHREN” (Eccli. 49, 14)

What follows is a most interesting melodrama. The famine was keenly felt in Chanaan, and thither too came the news that wheat was to be got in Egypt. Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy wheat, keeping only Benjamin at home. The ten patriarchs went to the governor of Egypt, but did not recognize in him their brother, whom they had sold into slavery twenty years earlier. Joseph, however, knew them; but he acted as though he did not, and spoke to them through an interpreter. He then feigned to think that they were

Asiatic spies come to study the weak places of the frontier at the northeast of Egypt. They protested that they had no such intention; that they were ten sons of twelve, of whom the youngest was at home with his father and one was dead. Joseph, to test their truthfulness, said that the youngest must be brought. He had them put in prison for three days. Then he kept Simeon as a hostage in Egypt and sent the nine home—Simeon to be released when they would return with Benjamin. They were given the wheat they required, and without their knowledge the money they paid for it was put back in the sacks with the wheat. They returned to Hebron and told all their strange adventure to Jacob, who at once protested that he would never allow Benjamin to go to Egypt (43, 38).

In time, however, famine and dire want forced Jacob to alter his purpose. He sent his sons to Egypt again; and this time Benjamin went, for they dare not go without him. When Joseph saw his brothers, he ordered a feast to be prepared, and invited them to share it. This only made them afraid and suspicious, especially since they had no explanation for the money they had found in their sacks. What if underlying all this was a plot designed by these cultured Egyptians and calculated to entrap and enslave them—simple, nomad Asiatics! Therefore, they first went to Joseph's steward and explained how they had found the money returned; but he reassured them, and brought Simeon forth from his prison to join them. Next, they offered presents to Joseph. He accepted them, and enquired about Jacob their father; but seeing Benjamin, his full brother, he could not keep back his tears. He retired from the audience hall to give free play to his emotion where no one could see him.

The feast was now made ready. Joseph, his Egyptian courtiers and retinue, and his brothers dined in the same room, but at separate tables to satisfy Egyptian religious customs.

The drama did not finish even then. Joseph allowed his brothers to depart without making known to them who he was. He told his steward to put his (Joseph's) silver drinking-cup into Benjamin's sack of wheat and to include the money Benjamin had paid for the wheat. Then when the brothers were gone a little way they were pursued by Joseph's orders and accused of stealing the cup. They protested their innocence, and offered to give up to death him in whose baggage it would be found, the others to go into slavery. To their awful consternation, it was found in Benjamin's sack. They returned in sorry plight. Juda made a most moving appeal to Joseph on behalf of Benjamin. He was the favorite son of his father; his full brother was dead; Jacob would die of grief if this boy were kept as a slave in Egypt; Juda himself would willingly remain a slave in his stead rather than return to Chanaan and witness his father's sorrow . . . (41, 1-34).

Joseph could restrain himself no longer. He commanded all the Egyptians to leave his presence while he revealed to his brothers who he was. They were astounded, but also afraid. Joseph reassured them, and pointed out that God's Providence had arranged all

this to preserve their chosen family. He told them to return home at once and bid their father come to Egypt to settle in Gessen (Hebrew—Goschen) near Joseph. Pharaoh too was glad to see Joseph's brothers, and he provided even the means of transport for Jacob and his property.

They returned and told Jacob. The announcement was so startling that for a time he could not believe it. However, when they told him all in detail and showed him the wagons sent by Pharaoh, he was at last convinced: "his spirit revived and he said, 'It is enough for me if Joseph my son be yet living. I will go and see him before I die.' " (45, 28).

JACOB IN EGYPT

Jacob, now a hundred and thirty years old, gathered all his property (it was mostly in sheep, goats and cattle), and he, with his family to the number of seventy, and their servants and slaves, set out to go to Egypt.

At Bersabee, he delayed in order to offer sacrifice to God, and there a vision in the night assured him of the Divine approbation of his journey, and of prosperity in Egypt for him and his tribe.

He did not go directly to Joseph (who was probably at Heliopolis) but to Gessen. From Gessen he sent Juda to apprise Joseph of his arrival. At once Joseph came to meet his father. They both wept for joy, and Jacob expressed well his emotion when he said, "Now shall I die with joy, because I have seen thy face and leave thee alive." (46, 30).

Joseph brought his father and five of his brothers to present them to the king. Before doing so he told them that when Pharaoh would question them about their mode of living they should not conceal that they and their ancestors were shepherds. They would then be allowed to settle in the good pasture land of Gessen at the northeast of the Delta near the frontier of Egypt, to live their own lives apart from the people of the country and to retain their own religion and traditions, because "the Egyptians have all shepherds in abomination." (46, 34).

The king received Jacob well and allowed him and his family to live in Gessen. Meantime the famine increased, and the money of the Egyptians was all expended. They were forced to mortgage their cattle and lands to obtain corn and wheat. Joseph thus enriched the royal treasury and secured to Pharaoh an annual levy of one-fifth of the produce of the land (47, 26).

JACOB AND JOSEPH

Jacob lived in his new home for seventeen years. When he knew his death to be near, he

called Joseph to him and, as a last favor, asked his son to bury him not in Egypt but in the burying place of Abraham at Hebron. Joseph promised on oath that it would be so.

Sometime after this Jacob fell into his last illness and word was sent to Joseph, who came bringing his two sons, Manasses and Ephraim. When he was told that Joseph was coming the old patriarch, although weak and dying, was so consoled that “being strengthened he sat on his bed.” (48, 2). He spoke to Joseph of the Divine promise made to him at Bethel that his descendants would possess the country of Chanaan. He adopted as his own the two sons of Joseph. He spoke again of Joseph’s mother, Rachel, and of her death at Ephrata—it was ever a vivid memory to him, “Rachel died from me in the land of Chanaan in the very journey and it was springtime.” (48, 7). We had that pathetic little detail about the time of the year before and now it comes with even greater pathos here from the failing patriarch’s dying lips.

Jacob now called Manasses and Ephraim towards him, and thanking God fervently that he had seen Joseph and Joseph’s sons he kissed the two boys affectionately. Joseph stood before his father with Ephraim on his left and Manasses on his right until they should receive Jacob’s blessing. Jacob crossed his hands and placed his right hand on the head of Ephraim (the younger) and his left on the head of Manasses. Joseph, thinking it was an error of his father (whose sight was now failed) tried to change his hands. However, Jacob persisted. It was no error. Ephraim was to be the greater. From then on, Ephraim takes precedence over his elder brother. Jacob blessed them both and prophesied great prosperity for them. Then he spoke to Joseph and foretold that the Divine protection would continue with him to the end and that his remains too would be brought back to the Promised Land for burial.

Jacob concluded his discourse to Joseph saying, “I give thee a portion above thy brethren, which I took out of the hand of the Amorrhite with my sword and bow.” (48, 22). The first part of this sentence is quite clear—Joseph’s two sons obtained each a portion in the division of Chanaan among the tribes of Israel (Josue 16, 1). However, a difficulty arises with regard to the second part, because Jacob was a timid character and there is no record of his prowess with the sword and bow. Joseph’s sons obtained the country about Sichem (later Samaria). There is reference to this in the Gospel, “He (Our Lord) cometh therefore to a city of Samaria, which is called Sichar, near the land which Jacob gave to his son Joseph.” (Saint John 4, 5). However, Jacob had bought this land in a very peaceable manner as we saw above.

Some (e.g., Fillion) regard this as a prophecy of the future conquest under Josue; and Jewish tradition supports the explanation. Hetzenauer, however, regards it as referring to an unjust reoccupation of the land by the Amorrhites (i.e., Chanaanites) in violation of their contract, and their forcible expulsion by Jacob—incidents not recorded for us by the sacred writer.

JACOB'S DEATH

Jacob now assembled his twelve sons about him and spoke prophetically of the future of their respective tribes. Ruben, Simeon, and Levi had committed grave crimes and his words to them are full of foreboding. Juda is the privileged one, heir to the Messianic promises. Jacob says, “The scepter shall not be taken away from Juda, nor a ruler from his thigh (in Hebrew—‘nor a staff from between his feet’) till he comes that is to be sent and he shall be the expectation of nations (Hebrew—‘and to him shall be the obedience of nations’)—”(49, 10).

The prophecies for Zabulon, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Aser, and Nephtali refer merely to their places in the Promised Land. On Joseph, however, his dying father lingers lovingly. He has much to say in praise of his past career—glorious alike in adversity, in prosperity, and in promise of a splendid destiny. He said, “The blessings of thy father are strengthened with the blessings of his fathers—until the desire of the everlasting hills should come; may they be upon the head of Joseph and upon the crown of the Nazarite (i.e., Prince) among his brethren.” (49, 26).

Last in order came Benjamin. The old man was weakening fast and he spoke briefly of the warlike character of the future tribe of Benjamin saying, “Benjamin a ravenous wolf...” (49, 27). Again, he asked that he should be buried in the Cave of Machpelah with Abraham and Isaac. Then, “he drew up his feet upon the bed and died—and he was gathered to his people.” (49, 32).

Joseph wept copiously for his father. He commanded skilled servants to embalm the body. This was a highly developed art in ancient Egypt and the process took forty days. In Egyptian fashion, seventy days were given over to mourning. Then, with Pharaoh's sanction, Joseph took the mummified body to Chanaan for burial. “A great company” (50, 9) formed the cortege—Joseph, his brothers, their families and slaves, officials of the royal house, the governors of Egypt, and a troop of soldiers. Before crossing the Jordan, seven days were spent in mourning (in the Hebrew manner). The Egyptians returned, Joseph and the Israelites went on to Chanaan, and Jacob was buried with his fathers in Hebron.

JOSEPH

Joseph's brothers were ill at ease lest he might take vengeance on them for their misdeeds, now that Jacob was dead. They sent a message to him, therefore, to say that Jacob, before he died, had asked him to forgive their past injustice to him. He nobly pardoned them, reminded them that God's Providence had brought good from their evil,

and promised to protect them in Egypt.

He lived in Egypt to the age of a hundred and ten, and saw his great-grandchildren. Before his death, he prophesied that by a special intervention of God the Hebrews would be brought from Egypt and led back to Chanaan. When that time would come his (Joseph's) remains were to be taken from Egypt also. After his death his body was mummified and buried temporarily in Egypt, to be exhumed at the Exodus and finally buried in Sichem near Jacob's Well. (Josue 24, 32).

FAITH AND SCIENCE

The narrative of this portion of Genesis is in perfect accord with what we know of the religion, history and social life of ancient Egypt. The seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine are very easily understood of those eastern countries where the produce of the earth is entirely dependent on the rainfall, and where drought means certain famine. Egypt in particular is called by Herodotus "the gift of the Nile," because the immense fertility of the Delta region is owing to the annual overflow of the Nile. In those ancient times, the overflow was not artificially controlled as now.

Again, there were commercial relations between Egypt and Palestine from 4,000 B.C. due to the economic conditions of both countries and their nearness to one another. Syria is mountainous with poor soil; but rich in timber and aromatic plants; varied in climate, and therefore, in products. Cedar wood was imported into Egypt to provide boxes for the mummies. Egypt is low-lying, fertile, and rich in grain and pasture—later, in the time of the Roman Empire, it was "the granary of Rome." This sheds light on the incident of the sale of Joseph into slavery to the caravan of merchants going into Egypt.

Clear evidence also is found of peaceful penetration into the Delta by Asiatic tribes, and the Asiatics were noted for their great facility for adapting themselves to a new country. Jacob is only one of many heads of semi-nomad tribes who acted thus.

Nor was the penetration always peaceful. At one period, these Asiatics took over forcibly a portion of the Nile country, and ruled it with their own kings. During the thirteenth Egyptian dynasty, the country was weakened politically by internal wars and feuds. Asiatics in thousands swarmed into the country across the unguarded north-eastern frontier. In a short time they became rulers (a very natural development), and these rulers are known as the Hyksos kings. At first, they destroyed the temples, oppressed the people, and established their own worship of their own god, Sutech. They built a new Capital at Avaris, for they had not the whole Delta but only the eastern part; a native Egyptian dynasty ruled at the same time in Thebes. Gradually, however, they accommodated themselves to Egyptian culture, and even appointed Egyptians to

administrative posts. In time, the native Theban dynasty broke their power, drove them out, and recovered the territory.

All this is in harmony with Joseph's sudden rise to power in Egypt. It is admitted that the Hyksos were ruling in our period, and naturally, an Asiatic would be favored, so that Joseph would find himself placed above his former master, Putiphar (an Egyptian, from the name). Semitic names in plenty have been found in the tombs and on the monuments of Egypt; and a certain Nehemen in particular, an Asiatic, who attained high rank under Apophis, a Hyksos king, resembles Joseph very closely in his career.

Details (such as the many-colored tunic as a sign of special favor and the gold ring and collar as a sign of high rank in Egypt) have been confirmed from the excavations while the Egyptian practice of embalming the dead is a commonplace of archaeology.

CONCLUSION

Such then in summary is the narrative of the Book of Genesis; and this brings us to the end of the Patriarchal period of Old Testament history. Of the fortunes of Jacob's family in Egypt the Bible does not tell us; we next hear of them very many years later in Exodus; and in the meantime the tribe of Jacob has become the Hebrew nation.

The difference between the divinely inspired early history of the Hebrew people and the early history of other peoples, e.g., Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome, is very striking. These latter make of their remote ancestors supermen, and trace back their origin to gods and goddesses. Their primitive history is mythology in which impossible powers and impossible achievements are attributed to human beings. Their gods are less than human; their men are more than human.

It is far otherwise with the Book of Genesis: the Patriarchs are presented always as human. They prophesy; they achieve wonderful things; but always as instruments of the One True God Who speaks and works in them. The honesty of the human writer of Genesis is shown everywhere in his work, but especially when he tells of the failures of these great men (and great men they were indeed), of their sins and crimes. They are intensely human in their joys and sorrows; they are still human in their greatest successes; but they are pathetically human in their weakness and in the fluctuations of fortune resulting from that weakness.

The Book of Genesis is of great and perennial interest, "There is nothing more beautiful than Genesis; nothing more useful." As literature, it is rich, varied, and sublime. As history, it is of supreme value, and every new discovery of scholars bears fresh testimony to its exactitude. As the inspired Word of God, it is instructive, elevating, and holy. To Dionysius of Halicarnassus is attributed the saying that 'History is philosophy by

examples.’ This is very true, indeed; and it follows that Sacred History is theology by examples. From the reading of Genesis, we learn much of God’s infinite might and majesty, of His mercy and condescension to human weakness. Especially do we see the working of His divinely benevolent Providence, disposing all things wisely, bringing good out of evil as He alone can, and “leading Joseph like a sheep.” (Psalm 79, 2).

Lastly, the frequent mention of the Messianic promises in this first Book of the Bible reminds us of the unity of the whole Bible in its central theme, Jesus Christ, “For the end of the Law is Christ . . .” Romans 10, 4); “ the law was our pedagogue in (in the Greek ‘unto,’ i.e., leading unto) Christ.” (Galatians 3, 24).

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